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AUTHOR Horan, J. Michael
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ABSTRACT

Millions of World War II veterans took advantage of the legislative drive establishing the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, the GI Bill. A Department of Veterans Affairs report examined how Vietnam veterans fared in higher education. Based on college participation rates (actually, training starts), not completion rates, Vietnam veterans appear to have fared well: 60% received some training benefit, compared to 51% for World War II and 43% for Korean War veterans. The Vietnam GI Bill, however, was poorly funded. Unlike the World War II veteran, Vietnam veterans had to pay for all college costs directly from their monthly entitlement benefits. A Florida survey of over 1,000 Vietnam veterans was conducted to examine the GI Bill. In every instance, Black, Hispanic, and American Indian college completion rates were lower than the rates of white veterans. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among Vietnam veterans was linked with college underachievement. The study concluded that the Vietnam GI Bill was probably a significant educational asset for veterans who could secure other financial resources, worked less than half time, did not suffer from PTSD, and were not members of a minority group. (NLA)

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THE GI BILL: MODEL PROGRAM GONE SOUR

BY

J. MICHAEL HORAN, ED.D.

World War II veterans have every reason to be grateful and proud of the American Legion for their historic efforts in spearheading the legislative drive to establish the Servicemen's Readjustment act of 1944. Popularly know as the GI Bill, this educational program for returning veterans marked the first time the federal government ventured into student assistance.

Paul Starr, in his book, The Disabled Army: Veterans After Vietnam had many flattering comments about the long term effects of the WW II GI Bill. He noted that the "general level of education in society has been raised significantly, has aided in the development of society, facilitated the transition to a modern service economy by upgrading the labor force, and fostered the expansion and democratization of the higher education system in the United States."

Millions of WW I veterans took advantage of their educational entitlements via the GI Bill. So dramatic was the perceived success of this first GI Bill that Starr also made this sweeping characterization of its historic significance: "Education has been America's modern frontier, and the GI Bill has been its Homestead Act." The genesis of our contemporary "learning society" and the vision of "lifelong learning" are clearly the social and educational by-products of the WW II GI Bill.

It is apparent that WW II veterans benefitted greatly from this innovative program. However, one could rightly ask "How has subsequent generations of American warriors fared in Higher Education, particularly Vietnam Veterans?"

The widely held assumption, both in and out of higher education circles, is that Vietnam veterans have done fairly well. Generally speaking, this speculation is based on the perceived success of the original WW II GI Bill, and not research by the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA). The only evidence offered by the DVA is its "college participation rates" - and they have admitted that these rates have limited value.

Nevertheless, a 1987 DVA monograph reports that 60% of all Vietnam Era veterans received some training benefit from the GI Bill. This figure compares quite favorably with the 51% rate for WW II vets, and the 43% rate for Korean war veterans. The increased participation rates are touted by the DVA as an indication that the social and educational policies underpinning the Vietnam Era GI Bill are being met. It must be kept in mind that these "participation rates" are, in fact, "training starts." and tell us very little about how veterans of any war finished their educational training, successfully or not.

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The paucity of research that has been conducted in this area points out how poorly funded the Vietnam Era GI Bill was when compared to both the WW II and the Korean GI Bills. A 1973 report by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) concluded by stating "that Vietnam veterans did not receive as much financial assistance as did WW II veterans when adjustments were made for payment of tuition, fees, books, and supplies." Another author in 1978 concluded that "Vietnam veterans received 50% less relative benefits than did the WW II veteran." And while it is true that Vietnam veterans received numerous increases to their monthly benefit, these increases merely raised the relative benefits to the level of Korean veterans which were about 25% less when compared to WW II veterans.

Unlike the WW II veteran, Vietnam veterans had to pay for all college costs directly from their monthly entitlement benefit. After paying for all costs associated with college, the Vietnam veteran was left with an average of about $130.00 per month which represented disposable income. The very low benefit structure of the GI Bill greatly limited ones choice of educational institution to mainly local public colleges and universities.

The low benefit structure of the GI Bill also forced veterans to seek other forms of financial income while attending college; the typical alternative was to work. Two-thirds of all Vietnam Era veterans worked full-time for the entirety of the time they were enrolled in college, in spite of the fact that a majority of them were attending school full time. This all suggests that Vietnam veterans fared rather poorly using their GI Bill. Until recently there was no research to confirm or deny such speculations.

In an attempt to answer the many unsettling questions about Vietnam veterans and their use and success with the GI Bill, a statewide survey in Florida was conducted and published in 1991. Titled "An Assessment of Florida Vietnam Theater Veterans Utilization of the GI Bill," this study was the first significant attempt to begin understanding how veterans used this federal entitlement. In every instance, Black, Hispanic, and American Indian college completion rates were lower than white veterans, who in turn were much lower than one might expect.

In a survey of over 1,000 Florida Vietnam theater veterans only 47 percent completed their college education goal. Thirty-six percent of black veterans, thirty-one percent of Hispanic veterans, and twenty percent of native Americans completed their college educational goal. In contrast, white veterans completed their college goal at a forty-nine percent rate.

This research was conducted at Florida State University and it underscored the failure of this federal student aid program to assist the majority of Vietnam veterans to achieve college goals.

The GI Bill benefit was so low that it actually discouraged veterans from going to college. It meant that veterans had to obtain other financial resources to attend and stay in college, and this typically meant getting a job and working thirty-one or more hours per week. Minorities were especially at risk of college failure because they had less access to other financial resources and fewer opportunities for employment.

This landmark study also found that the more veterans had to work, the less their chance of completing college goals. College completion rates ranged from a high of 78 percent for vets who worked one to ten hours per week to a low of only 30 percent for those that worked 41 or more hours per week. This inverse relationship between hours worked and college completion sadly reinforces the idea that inadequate GI Bill benefits made work outside college a necessity for the overwhelming majority of Vietnam veterans.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among Vietnam veterans was also linked with considerable underachievement in college. Veterans with PTSD completed their educational goals at a 32 percent rate. Black and Hispanic veterans had a two in three chance of not completing their goals, while whites had about a one in three chance of not completing college goals. Veterans with PTSD who worked, regardless of the number of hours per week, showed the lowest rates of college completion in this study - about 20 percent.

The study concluded by noting that "the Vietnam Era GI Bill was probably a significant educational asset if you could secure other financial resources, worked less than half-time, didn't suffer from PTSD, and were not a minority." Unfortunately this is a very small number of the men and women who served in Vietnam.

Is this the final word on the Vietnam Era GI Bill? Probably not, but is does reinforce the notion that Congress should fund an independent research organization to conduct a national study. It also suggests that the ten year entitlement period for the GI Bill should be extended much longer, perhaps a lifetime. For those with war related injuries such as PTSD, the painful memories of their suffering last a lifetime - so should their hard earned benefits.

While the WW II GI Bill has perhaps served as a model for continuing our nation's commitment to those who "have borne the battle," it is apparent that it needs a major overhaul. This is an area when all the major veterans service organizations, including the American Legion, have a well earned interest at stake. Today, education is more than a luxury, it is a right that was "earned the old fashioned way." Now is the time for all veterans to take this entitlement much more seriously before benefits are eroded away completely.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Dr. J. MICHAEL HORAN is a Vietnam theater veteran who served with the U. S. Marine Corps. He recently completed his doctorate in higher education leadership at Florida State University and is the author of the GI Bill cited in this story. Currently he is working with the Florida State Department of Education as a Program Specialist in Health Occupations.